

weekend  
*escape*



Inner city meets country

# Inner city meets country

With a burgeoning arts, food and wine scene, Castlemaine has all the attractions of hipster city locales, great coffee included, writes **DAN STOCK**

**Y**ou know, it's now referred to as North Northcote," Giles Lapalus says as he pours me another taste of his biodynamic rosé. I didn't, but it makes perfect sense. We'd spent the morning wandering around Castlemaine on this glorious winter's day — sunnily crisp and cloudless — and there did seem to be an unusually high proportion of skinny-jeaned blokes with beards partnered with horn-rimmed, asymmetrically haircut girls.

The weather here was in stark contrast to the drizzly grey northern suburbs we'd left not even 90 minutes earlier, even if the proportion of hipsters wasn't. But with a burgeoning food and wine scene coupled with a longstanding history of artists moving to the area, the attraction of Castlemaine for those wanting to swap town for country without giving up their inner-city sensibilities — single origin coffee, produce with provenance, craft beer and, yes, biodynamic wine — is abundantly clear.

Lapalus is the chief winemaker at Sutton Grange, a former thoroughbred racing stable about 20 minutes out of Castlemaine that has been under vine since 1998. The Burgundy-born winemaker has been cultivating the vineyard under organic and, since 2002, biodynamic principles, and produces a number of wines under the Fairbank and Sutton Grange Estate labels.

Some of Australia's best wine critics are big fans of Lapalus and his textured, terroir-specific wines, with Max Allen saying he makes "some of Australia's best, most complex and textually satisfying wines", and after tasting the range, which includes a pinky gold, powerfully punchy rose, an intense viognier and a spicy

syrah, I'm not one to argue. Sutton Grange is one of more than 30 wineries in the Bendigo region, an area famed for its shiraz and cab sav, though all manner of varieties are planted, including semillon, riesling and chardonnay along with Spanish and Italian red varietals.

It is from these local goldfields wineries that Hayden Winch draws to create his unique "barrel wall" at Public Inn, where wine is poured directly from the barrel into carafes of varying sizes.

The European-inspired bistro and bar is a far cry from the historic gold-rush pub's previous incarnation as the Criterion Hotel, where its insalubrious reputation was such that it was dubbed the "swinging arms".

Chef Rohan Heir's menu draws on the rich produce of the area and combines it into dishes that are skilfully refined executions of bold flavours. A tasting plate — smoked eel wrapped in kaiserfleisch teamed with beetroot, venison carpaccio with salted grapes and a crumbed then crisp-fried quail egg on a rich sauce gribiche — taken in front of a roaring open fire goes some way to explaining the kitchen and was a delightful way to start our meal.

Moving into the

dining area, a procession of dishes followed, including a wonderful confit shiitake mushroom and roast chestnut entree and a slow-cooked pork fillet teamed with an apple and celery salad. Washed down with wines from the barrel wall, this meal was very much a delicious celebration of the region.

A celebration of a different region — think French countryside — is what you'll find at the charming Red Brick Barn on the outskirts of Castlemaine, at Chewton. A hand-built labour of love for owners Daniel and Glenny, this traditional-looking barn is but a few years old. Delightfully decorated with the couple's chic flea market finds here and in France, the barn is a gorgeously comfortable, stylishly wonderful place to while away the time. There's even an outdoor shower and bath, where just the stars and two resident donkeys will keep you company.

As befitting a town that made its fortune during the gold rush of the 1850s and '60s, the public buildings are grand and the boulevards wide. It's a pleasure to wander the streets taking in the vibe, laid-back but not sleepy. Which shouldn't be surprising, given the good coffee that's on offer at cafes dotted around, including Winch's other venue Republic, a cool breakfast-lunch space housed in the old Castlemaine Fire Station, and Apple

Annies, a little cafe with bakery attached where

John Stekerhofs is producing famed croissants, cakes and other sweet treats. The food is fine, the wine is plenty; the coffee good and the people friendly — you know what Northcote, eat your heart out.

The writer was a guest of Public Inn and Red Brick Barn

## THE DEAL

### GETTING THERE

Castlemaine is about a 90-minute drive northwest of Melbourne.

### STAYING THERE

Two-night stay, Thurs-Sun, at Red Brick Barn, 11 Manchester St, Chewton, is \$550; less in midweek.

The barn can accommodate up to three people with a privacy screen separating the open loft room, and breakfast provisions provided include free-range eggs, regional apple juice and other locally sourced offerings.

### ONLINE

redbrickbarn.com.au  
publicinn.com.au

All bases: eat at Cafe Republic (top), and sleep in Chewton's Red Brick Barn (left).

